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ABSTRACT

Identification of age differences as a major characteristic of satisfying heterosexual love relationships was investigated. Married couples (N=102), divided equally into three groups, i.e., young, middle-aged, and older adults, completed a 108-item instrument, rating each statement in terms of how well it described their current love relationship. Results indicated that: (1) older adults have higher ratings for emotional security and loyalty and lower ratings for sexual intimacy than young or middle-aged adults; (2) young adults have higher ratings for communication than middle-aged or older adults; and (3) over time, love relationships are more likely to be based on loyalty, commitment, and tradition. (Author/HLM)

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LOVING HAPPILY EVER AFTER: AGE DIFFERENCES IN SATISFYING LOVE RELATIONSHIPS

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Reflected in the increasing incidence and acceptance of divorce is the widespread notion that love can't last forever. Still, some love relationships do last a lifetime and seem to weather well with age. Although little is known about what keeps love alive as lovers grow older together, personal experience and developmental theories of love (Freud, 1949; Harlow, 1971; Maslow, 1954; Bissett, 1970; Shostrom, 1972; Orlinsky, 1972; Rosow, 1957; Winch, 1967; Levinger & Snoek, 1972; Levinger, 1974; Cuber & Harroff, 1965; Rollins & Feldman, 1970) suggest that love relationships do change over time. The most common theme is that the passionate fires of youthful love are somehow transformed into the deeper, more serene and tender love of advanced age.

The purpose of this research was to identify age differences in the major characteristics of satisfying heterosexual love relationships. Generally, the design of the research was to have satisfied lovers of different ages describe their actual experiences in their love relationships. Specifically, 102 married couples, divided equally into three age groups, young adult (mean age, 28 years), middle-aged adult (mean age, 45 years) and older adult (mean age, 65 years), were nominated to participate in the study by people who knew them well and who judged them to be very much in love. The average number of years married for each age group was 5, 21 and 37 years, respectively.

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As a measure of their love experiences, Ss completed a Q-sort of 108 statements, rating each statement in terms of how well it described their current love relationship. The Q-sort statements were derived from the theoretical and empirical literature on love and reflected a wide variety of possible experiences people might have in love relationships. The statements had previously been consistently classified by independent raters as reflecting six different components of love: Communication, Emotional Security, Help/Play Behaviors, Loyalty, Respect and Sexual Intimacy (see Table 1). Based on the ratings, scores for each S were determined for each of the six dimensions of love.

A multivariate analysis of variance was performed, where the independent variable was age (3 levels) and the dependent variables were the scores for the components of love. The overall test of significance for age using Wilk's criterion was highly significant ($p < .001$). The F value, using Rao's approximation, was 3.58. Univariate F tests showed significant age differences ($p < .01$) for the Emotional Security, Communication, Sexual Intimacy and Loyalty ratings. Post-hoc tests, using Duncan's Multiple Range procedure, showed that older lovers had significantly higher ratings for Emotional Security and Loyalty and significantly lower ratings for Sexual Intimacy compared to the young adult and middle-aged groups. Also, young adults had a significantly higher rating for Communication compared to the middle-aged and older groups.

The findings clearly indicate that the nature of love in satisfying relationships is different at different ages. The results offer support for the common theme in the developmental theories of love that passion

and sexual intimacy are relatively more important in early adulthood, whereas tender feelings of affection and loyalty are more important in the love relationships of later life. The relatively lower rating for Sexual Intimacy by older lovers is consistent with other research (Kinsey, et al, 1948, 1953; Masters & Johnson, 1968; Troll, 1971; Pfeiffer, et al, 1969; Neiswender, Birren & Schaie, 1975, 1976). General slowing of the nervous system, decreased vigor and energy, lack of novelty in the sexual relationship, illness, the belief that older people "should not" be sexually interested or active, and generational differences in the importance of sex are possible explanations for the reduced importance of sexual intimacy in the relationships of older lovers. While passion was less important to late life love, the softer side of love became relatively more important. The higher ratings for Emotional Security for older adults suggests that feelings of tenderness and affection as well as the sense of security are more characteristic of long-lived love.

The findings also support the notion that, over time, love relationships are less likely to be based on intense companionship and communication and are more likely to be based on tradition, commitment, and loyalty (Cuber & Harroff, 1965; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Rollins & Feldman, 1970). The findings are consistent with other research findings that communication and companionship experiences are more characteristic of new relationships (Driscoll, Lipetz & Davis, 1972; Rollins & Feldman, 1970; Cuber & Harroff, 1965), while loyalty, sacrifice, dependency (Driscoll, Lipetz & Davis, 1972), conventionality (Troll, 1971), emotional commitment and interdependency (Levinger & Snoek, 1972;

Levinger, 1974), and the more traditional, calm, and loyalty-based styles of loving (Cuber & Harroff, 1965) become more characteristic of love which has weathered the test of time.

In addition to these developmental explanations, a generational differences explanation is equally possible. The belief that love means loyalty and being able to depend on one another is likely to be most consistent with the attitudes and beliefs of today's older generation. By contrast, while today's young adult lovers place considerable emphasis on honest communication and self-disclosure in relationships, they are less likely to emphasize loyalty or long-term commitment to a relationship.

In summary, the findings of this research suggest that love can last a lifetime, but that the nature of love may be transformed by time. What these findings suggest is that passion, intense communication and self-disclosure are most important to affectionate bonding and love early in a relationship, while the sense of tenderness, emotional security, loyalty and commitment develop more slowly over time. In short, love relationships become less passionate, but more tender, secure, comfortable and committed as lovers grow older together.

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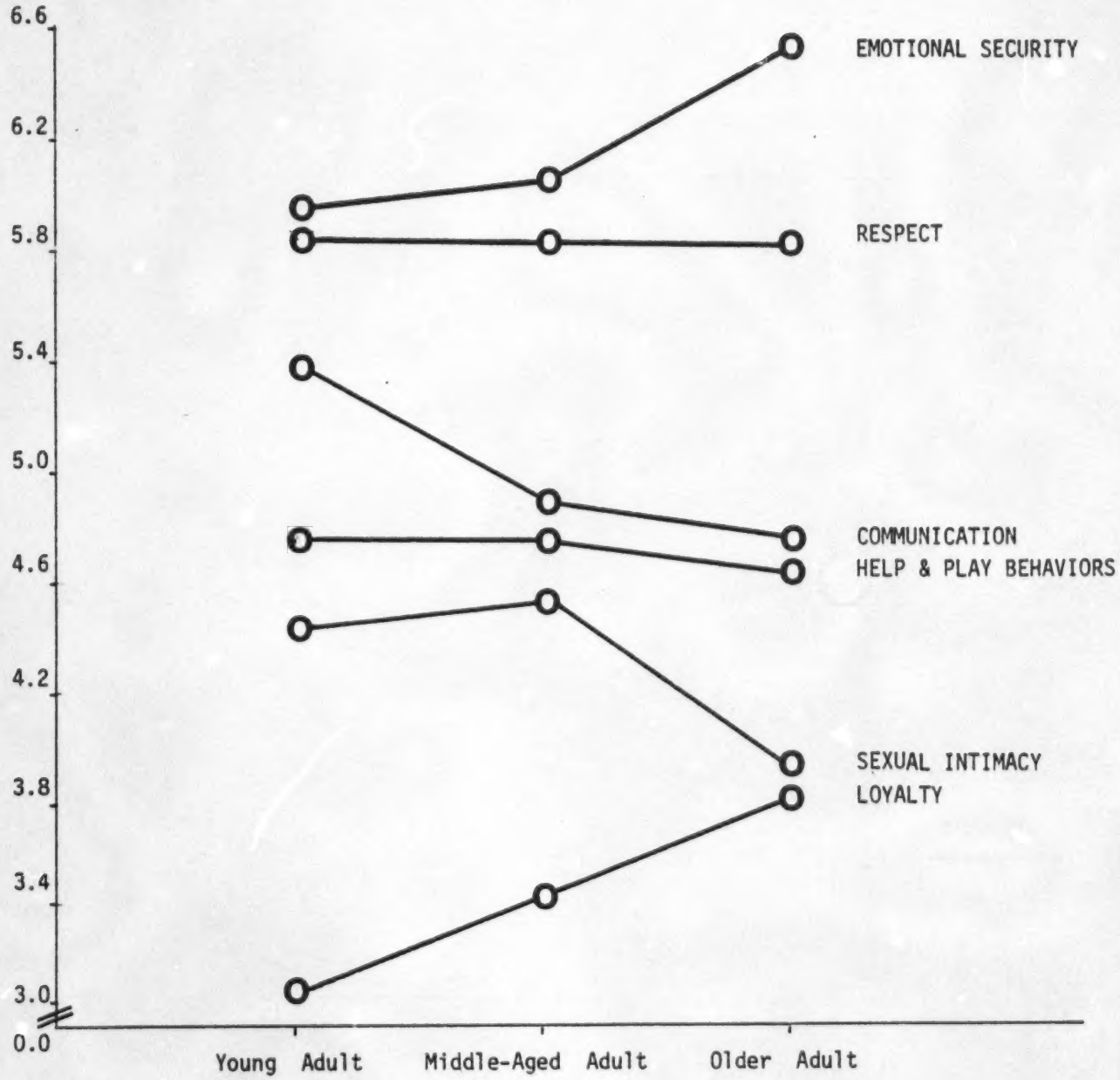
TABLE 1

Summary of Content of Q-Sort Categories

COMPONENT OF LOVE	MEANING	SAMPLE STATEMENT
Emotional Security	Affection, Trust, Caring, Concern Security	"I really feel I can trust him (her)."
Respect	Respect, Understanding Patience, Tolerance	"We share common goals for our lives."
Help and Play Behaviors	Common Interests, Shared Activities, Helpful, Supportive	"We spend a great deal of time together."
Communication	Honest Communication Self-Disclosure, Good Listener	"He (she) finds it easy to confide in me."
Sexual Intimacy	Physical and Sexual Intimacy Excitement, and/or Tenderness	"We try to please each other physically."
Loyalty	Commitment to the Future of the Relationship	"The future is sure to be perfect as long as we are together."

FIGURE 1

Mean Scores by Age for Component-of-Love Ratings



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